

STD PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP FACTLINE

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ALCOHOL/DRUG USE NOT LINKED TO RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

BACKGROUND: One of the major assumptions underlying prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is that use of alcohol or drugs before sex increases the risk for unsafe sexual practices (for example, lack of condom use) and acquisition of an STD. But the evidence supporting this assumption is fairly weak. While some surveys [usually of individuals at one point in time] do suggest that people who report use of drugs also report a greater number of unsafe sexual practices, they are limited in that they ask about use of drugs in general as well as sexual behaviors in general, and the two may not be directly linked. Rather, both behaviors may reflect some other underlying characteristic of the individual. And there are a few studies that actually show increased use of condoms or other contraceptives after alcohol or drug use. Clarifying the exact link between these two behaviors is important in order to better guide public information and STD prevention efforts.

RESEARCH: Investigators at the Indiana University School of Medicine have been conducting a research project for prevention of STD recurrences among a group of 16-19 year old young women in the metropolitan Indianapolis area. Only young women found to have an STD at a clinic visit were eligible to participate. During the study, women completed an extensive questionnaire about sexual attitudes and behaviors (including past use of condoms) and were asked to maintain a diary. The diary recorded dates of sexual intercourse, their partner's initials, whether a condom was used and whether alcohol or drugs was used before intercourse.

A total of 80 women maintained diaries. 73% (58/80) did not report any use of drugs before intercourse. The 22 subjects who reported at least one episode of alcohol or drug use before sex recorded a total of 410 acts of intercourse for which complete data were available. Only 92/410 (22%) acts followed use of drugs or alcohol. Statistical analysis demonstrated that the best predictor of whether a woman used a condom was the degree to which she had used them in the past. In general, drug or alcohol use was not associated with decreased condom use although there was a very slight suggestion that women who reported use of drugs or alcohol before sex with a *new* partner were less likely to use condoms than when they did not use drugs.

IMPLICATIONS: It may be that in a few instances, use of alcohol or drugs does lead to unsafe sexual behaviors. But the results of this study, as well as several others using the same in-depth analysis of specific acts of sexual intercourse, do not support the notion that alcohol or drug use leads to risky sexual behaviors on a widespread basis. Rather, past use of condoms is a much better predictor of future use of condoms than is alcohol or drug use. While alcohol and drug use is clearly a risk factor for many serious health and safety problems, reducing use of these substances is not likely to yield measurable results in preventing STDs.

Reference: Fortenberry JD, Orr DP, Katz BP, Brizendine EJ, Blythe MJ. Sex under the influence: A diary self-report study of substance use and sexual behavior among adolescent women. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 1997;24:313-321.

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